

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson

December 9, 2007

The Great Tribulation

8:30 and 10:30 am, Holy Communion

The Text: Matthew 24: 15-31

15 "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand)"

16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. **17** Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house,

18 and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.

19 And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! **20** Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath.

21 For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no,

and never will be. **22** And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.

23 Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. **24** For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

25 See, I have told you beforehand. **26** So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out.

If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it.

For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. **29** "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. **30** Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. **31** And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Introduction

This morning we come to the second of three sermons on Matthew 24. This is a chapter that deals with two main subjects that are presented to us through the questions the disciples ask Jesus in verse 3. Matthew tells us:

As Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?"

The "these things be" refers to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD and "the sign of your coming" refers to the Second Coming. Last week we looked at verses 1-14, which concentrated on the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, and then went on to describe what life will be like in between Jesus' first and second comings. This morning and in two weeks we will be looking at the theme of the Second Coming. Today we will especially concentrate on that period called the Great Tribulation.

There is a caution that needs to be applied to this text: "Warning, handle with care!" This material has at times been interpreted in one of two ways. It has either been dismissed as irrelevant, with commentators concluding that there is nothing here that will ever materialize in this world; or it has been viewed superstitiously with interpreters setting dates that anticipate its fulfillment. This has been done in ways that distort Jesus' meaning. Neither view is helpful.

Clearly this material needs to be interpreted with the understanding of a literal fulfillment but without clear predictions as to the dates and times. However, we also need to approach this by stating: "Do not say more than the text permits."

As we now enter into this passage, I will show you that it helps to answer three questions:

1. What are the signs we need to look for that the end of the age is near?
2. What will the age of the Great Tribulation be like?
3. When will we know that the Lord Jesus has come?

- 1. What are the signs we need to look for that the end of the age is near?**

In order to answer this question we need to return to the last verse of last week's passage. There Jesus tells the disciples:

"And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

Here Jesus is teaching that when the gospel of the kingdom has been preached throughout the whole world, this will be a clear sign that the end will follow in close proximity. It is worth noting that we live in an era where this preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom is being realized in a way that was never before possible. However, there is still a long way to go before it can be said the Gospel of the Kingdom has been proclaimed throughout the whole world.

According to the United Bible Societies 2006 report there are some 6912 languages in the world. There are complete bibles in 429 languages; portions in 853 languages; testaments in 1, 144 for a total of 2, 426 languages.¹ According to Wycliffe Bible Translators, since 2000 there have been on average 74 new translations a year of the entire Bible or in part. This compares with an average of 25 translations in the 1990s.² This means there are some 4486 languages that do not yet have any access to the Bible in their tongue. So while the work of Bible translation has increased steadily, there are still many languages that need to have the Bible translated into their own language for effective evangelization to take place.

Now let's move on to verse 15 as we continue to find the answer to the question: What are the signs we need to look for at the end of the age? I will spend a disproportionate amount of time on verse 15 because it is the most complex verse in this passage and will take a lot of unpacking to understand its meaning. This is something Matthew himself directs us to do by saying parenthetically: "Let the reader understand".

15 "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand)"³

¹ United Bible Societies Statistical Summary of Languages with the Scriptures 2006.
<http://www.biblesociety.org/latestnews/latest390-slr2006stats.html>.

² Wycliffe Bible Translators releases new worldwide Bible translation statistics.
<http://www.acctv.com.au/article/detail.asp?id=5617>.

³ Off all the commentaries I read on this verse, Ray Stedman's work was most helpful and most clearly presented. To see what he says in even more detail please go to: Ray Stedman: *The Worship of Man* at:
<http://www.raystedman.org/olivet/oliv03.html>.

For the present let us seek to understand this sign of the close of the age. It will be, says Jesus, "the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel." The sign our Lord refers to of the abomination of desolation is mentioned in Daniel at least three times. It is the sign of a man, a man who offers himself to the Jews to be worshipped as God. The disciples clearly understood that he was referring to the predictions in Daniel of the coming of a man who would take away the continual burnt-offering of the Jews and instead offer himself as "the abomination of desolation" or the desolating sacrilege. That man is described in **Daniel 8:23-26:**

23 *"In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a stern-faced king, a master of intrigue, will arise. 24 He will become very strong, but not by his own power. He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy the mighty men and the holy people. 25 He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power. 26 "The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future."*

Note that Daniel was told that the vision was not concerning his own days but it concerns the distant future. Those who do not see this as having any application for us insist that this was fulfilled in the turbulent days of the Maccabees in 168-165 B.C., when a Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes, did indeed desecrate the Temple in Jerusalem, offer a sow upon the altar, and erect a statue of Jupiter to be worshipped.⁴ But though that was undoubtedly an historic foreview of the final "abomination of desolation" it could not have been the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy, for otherwise Jesus would not have said, more than 165 years after Antiochus, "when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place" as a future event.⁵

⁴ Michael J Wilkens The NIV Application Commentary *Matthew* (Zondervan 2004) page 778

⁵ Another reference in Daniel to this sacrilege is found in chapter 9. I don't have time to mention it in the spoken version of the sermon but I don't want to leave it out of the written record. It is in the midst of the tremendous prophecy that is called the "the vision of the seventy weeks." This was an announcement to Daniel by the angel Gabriel that God had marked off a period of 490 years (seventy weeks of years), which would begin when the Persian king, Artaxerxes, issued a commandment to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (fulfilled in 445 B.C.)⁵ It would terminate with a period of terrible trouble during which a coming prince would cause the Jewish sacrifice and offering to cease and would thus establish the abomination which makes desolate.

Another glimpse of this "prince who is to come" is given in Daniel 11:36-39. There he is called simply "the king."

36 "The king will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed, for what has been determined must take place. **37** He will show no regard for the gods of his fathers or for the one desired by women, nor will he regard any god, but will exalt himself above them all. **38** Instead of them, he will honor a god of fortresses; a god unknown to his fathers he will honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts. **39** He will attack the mightiest fortresses with the help of a foreign god and will greatly honor those who acknowledge him. He will make them rulers over many people and will distribute the land at a price.

These passages in Daniel agree concerning the coming of a man who shall be the fulfillment of our Lord's prediction and shall be the sign of the end of the age. There are also other references in Scripture to this man. Paul is unmistakably describing the same man in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4:

*Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, (this is a reference to the Second Coming) unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, **4** who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.*

Before he uttered these words on the Mount of Olives, Jesus himself had referred to this coming man when he said to the rulers of the nation on one occasion,

The angel said that first seven, and then sixty-two of those weeks (a total of 483 years) would end just before the Messiah would be "cut off." A period of indeterminate length would then intervene before the 70th or final week (seven years) would. During that indeterminate period the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed and the Jews would endure wars and desolations until the end. The actual words are these in Daniel 9:26-27:

After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. **27** He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven.' In the middle of the 'seven' he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.

"I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive."⁶

This is that Antichrist which has been predicted in all the Scriptures, and who shall symbolize in his person all that stands against God because humanity will have enthroned itself as the only god men and women need.

Now you may be wondering, what is the Holy Place Jesus is referring to here? He says this abomination will stand in the "Holy Place". But if as we learned last week the Temple was destroyed by Titus in A.D. 70 where will this be? The obvious answer is, the Temple must be rebuilt in Jerusalem. The Lord is clearly indicating that there will come a time when the Jews will repossess the temple area. In view of that expectation perhaps the most important event since the first century was the capture of East Jerusalem by the Jews in the Six Day War of 1967. For the first time in 1897 years (since A.D. 70) Jews were once again in possession of the temple site.⁷ It is now occupied by the Moslem mosque called the Dome of the Rock and the existence of that shrine raises a tremendous obstacle to the rebuilding of a Jewish temple. But there are those in Jerusalem today who are intent on seeing the Third Temple built. At the Temple Institute website are these words:

The scholars of the Temple Institute have dedicated their lives to raising public awareness of the importance of the Holy Temple in the life of all mankind, both Israel and the nations of the world. The Institute seeks to disseminate this knowledge, rekindle the desire and yearning for the rebuilding of the Holy Temple, and help to prepare as much as possible for the actual rebuilding.⁸

Now before we leave this first question I need to say that much caution is to be exercised as we try to understand this verse. We can say that there seem to be indications that the two things Jesus spoke of in the year 33 AD have signs of being fulfilled. Will it be soon? We cannot say. However we can say that the world wide propagation of the Gospel of the Kingdom and the events that have been unfolding in Israel for more than forty years do suggest a movement towards the fulfilling of this prophecy.

2. Let's move into the second question which is: What will the age of the Great Tribulation be like?

⁶ John 5:43

⁷ Six-Day War," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2007
<http://encarta.msn.com> © 1997-2007 Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

⁸ The Temple Institute: <http://www.templeinstitute.org/main.htm>

Jesus helps us to understand these days when in verses 16 and following he tells us:

16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 17 Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, 18 and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. 19 And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! 20 Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. 21 For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. 22 And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. 23 Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. 24 For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. 25 See, I have told you beforehand. 26 So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it.

The preposition “then” is key to understanding the events Jesus is describing here. It is after the abomination that causes desolation is established that the time of great tribulation will come. These are days of great distress in which Jesus says that people will need to flee Jerusalem without thought to retrieving belongings because the suffering will be so catastrophic. It will also be a time when there will be the appearance of many false messiahs who will seek to lead even the elect astray. You will notice that the trials of these days will be unlike anything the world had ever before known. This is because the abomination that sets itself up in the Temple will create a desolation of unimaginable proportions. Desolation speaks of an arid, barren and lifeless place. Because life will be so bleak people will look anywhere and everywhere for hope. And so there will be those who will look be attracted to false prophets, just as vultures gather to a corpse.

And yet says Jesus this time of the Great Tribulation precedes the coming of the Son of Man. For Jesus in answering the third question:

3 When will we know that the Lord Jesus has come?

says:

For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 29 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 30 Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 31 And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Now there is enough here to turn into a sermon of its own. But for today I want to mention only one thing about this text. Jesus says that it will be after the tribulation that there will be in heaven the sign of the Son of Man. What does he mean by this? Again he is referring to the Prophet Daniel. In the seventh chapter of Daniel there is a description of kingdoms that set themselves up against God. At the climax of this vision we read of a court scene, where the Ancient of Days judges those kingdoms that have opposed the purposes of God. After this judgment there is a scene that is described like this:

13*"I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
14 And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.*

The reference to the sign of the Son of Man is alluding to what is written here. What will the sign be? It will be the vindication of the Messiah, and the establishing of his kingdom where all people and nations will serve him. His is the only kingdom that shall not be destroyed. It will be a bold and glorious appearance that will have cosmic consequences, which is what the language is verses 29 and 30 highlights.

We have seen that this passage answers three questions for us:

1. What are the signs we need to look for that the end of the age is near?
2. What will the age of the Great Tribulation be like?
3. When will we know that the Lord Jesus has come?

Advent calls us to think deeply about these questions because Jesus' first coming at Christmas can never be separated from what is taught in the New Testament about the Second Coming. As you read through the Gospels, Epistles and Revelation much more is said about the second coming than the first.

So while we live in the light of this story and the anticipation of increasing desolation, the gospel comes as glorious good news. This is why the first coming is so important for us now. For the Bible declares that while there will be tribulation in the world of increasing intensity, we can know, even now, the refreshing presence that Jesus brings into our lives. You will remember that in John's gospel when Jesus sensed the emptiness in the lives of many in his own day, he said, "If any one thirst, [Where do you thirst? In a wilderness!] let him come to me and drink... 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"⁹ The solution for thirst in a desert is to drink, endlessly and continuously, of this foundation. There is that old hymn by Horatio Bonar that we sang as the gradual. It puts it nicely,

*"I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Behold, I freely give
The living water, thirsty one.
Stoop down, and drink, and live.'
I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life-giving stream.
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
And now I live in Him."*

He's the answer. But notice what stands in the way. It is human pride. Men and women does not want to stoop down, to drink. We do not like to acknowledge the fact that we are dependent, even helpless. Man resists that, and because he does he will not stoop, and if he will not stoop he cannot drink. But if he does stoop and drink, he will, as the hymn declares, live! It will not be but one drink but a continual drinking, and therefore, a continual living. This is God's answer to the terrible emptiness and desolation of this and any age.

⁹ John 7:37-38

We can be sure that as the age goes on to its close, things are going to get worse. The sense of futility will deepen, the suicide rate will increase, the pressures will become more intense. Yet through all those darkening days the gospel will offer its glorious invitation, "Thirsty one! Stoop down, and drink, and live"

No one ever needs to learn to drink. Every baby is born with the ability to drink. The one thing the human heart can do without instruction is receive. Receive Jesus Christ, drink of him, ask him to come in to be in you a fountain of living water, Master of every moment of life. In your response to that invitation, the glorious promise will begin to be fulfilled as you live in the present anticipating the Great Tribulation and the Glorious Second Coming of the King of Kings.

A Prayer

Father, what amazing words were these that fell from the lips of the Lord Jesus on that day so long ago in history, so close in meaning. We ask forgiveness for the many times we have turned from his voice and heeded the lie around us. Teach us to commit ourselves alone to him, who can supply the need of our lives and meet the cry of our hearts. Let us find in him the glorious refreshment of living water. In his name, Amen